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ABSTRACT

From the breakin through the pardon of President Nixon, the London "Times" maintained thorough coverage of the Watergate scandal--a difficult task, considering the complexities of the American judicial and political systems. A special Watergate section was added to the other sections of the "Times," and even the British parliamentary election campaign failed to move Watergate from the front page. Editorially, the "Times" was at first sympathetic to President Nixon, and as the investigation was undertaken by all three branches of government, the "Times" accused the Washington "Post" of creating a "trial by press" situation by its persistent involvement. However, the "Times" later ran an editorial pointing out that the American judicial system was different from that of the British, and when Nixon refused to give up the crucial tape recordings, the "Times" could no longer support him. The working reporters for the "Times" were anti-Nixon from the beginning of the story, exhibiting a bias that showed plainly in their news columns. The major difference between the American and the British press was that the latter was unencumbered by "objectivity." The major strength of "Times" coverage of Watergate was a thorough understanding of the intricacies of the American political process and a "special relationship" between many British and American journalists. (HTH)

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CONFLICT IN THE COLONIES

THE LONDON TIMES COVERAGE OF WATERGATE FROM THE BREAK-IN TO THE PARDON

BY

JAMES GLEN STOVALL

The afternoon of August 8, 1974, was a short one for Louis Heren. The squat, mustachioed deputy editor of the *Times* of London was awaiting word from Washington that Richard Nixon, under siege from the continuous revelations of Watergate, was going to resign.

Nixon had admitted his guilt in the cover-up scheme on Monday of that week. Sometime during each succeeding day he had felt compelled to issue a message no one any longer believed: I'm not going to resign, I'm going to stay and fight. By Thursday, however, a different message was getting through to him: He could not remain in office; if he did not resign now, he would soon be impeached by the House of Representatives and convicted by the Senate.

His days in the Oval Office were numbered.

Heren knew that, too. He, perhaps more than any other newsman in Europe, understood what was happening in Washington. He had spent many years there as a working reporter, had revisited there regularly, and had maintained many contacts there. Just a year before, he had written a remarkable piece on the impeachment process, and the *Times* had devoted a page and a half of space to it.

Now, another long piece – this one a four-page spread on the fall of Richard Nixon – had been put on the press at New Printing House Square in London. It had been produced under his direction and much of it had been written by him. The printers now awaited his word to start the presses rolling.

Heren was reluctant to order the piece into print, however. It seemed that Nixon had only one option, resignation, but Heren had seen him pull rabbits out of his political hat before. It would be 2 a.m. London time before Nixon went on television, far too late to print an extra four pages. Heren was 95 percent sure that this would be the last full day of the Nixon presidency, but he needed one more word of confirmation.

To get it, he picked up the phone and dialed directly to the Justice Department in Washington. A highly placed official, who had been a friend of Heren's for many years (and whose name Heren still won't reveal), came on the line.

Was this the day Nixon was going to resign, Heren asked.

Yes, his friend said.

Are you sure?

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Again the answer was yes.

Heren hung up, then placed a call to the press room and told them to start production. The next day *Times* readers had four extra pages of analysis and commentary to supplement the front page story on the resignation of the President of the United States.[1]

The incident is a minor one, but it demonstrates the 'special relationship' that many British journalists have with America. One of the most remarkable things about the British press, at least to American readers, is the amount of international news – especially American news – found in the quality newspapers of Britain.

Some of the explanations for the British press' international outlook are obvious: the empire mentality that assumes Britain's importance in the world; the fact that Britain, more than any other western industrialized nation is dependent on international trade for her livelihood; and the large international circulations of British newspapers. The preference for American news may also be explained with the obvious: a common language, heritage, and similar political outlook; political and economic alliances; and a great deal of personal contact among citizens of the two countries.

The flagship of the British press is the *Times* of London. This newspaper is Britain's paper-of-record and has played an important role during the last 150 years of British journalism. It is still thought to be of great influence with British government officials and business and social leaders. Like other quality papers in London, the *Times* devotes several pages of each edition to foreign news, much of which is gathered from a field of correspondents in many corners of the world.

Watergate was a story particularly suited to the *Times*, and the *Times*' coverage of it is especially worthy of study. Watergate was an American domestic political crisis of great complexity and drama. Although it had farreaching foreign policy implications, it remained essentially a domestic and political story. It emphasized factors unique about the American political system: the checks and balances of the three branches of the government; the power of the presidency; the investigative role of Congress; the power of the judiciary, and so on. To understand what was happening during Watergate, one must have understood many of these complexities.

The job of the foreign correspondent, then, was a difficult one. He not only had to report the events of the day, but he had to put them in the context that his readers could understand. This is a study of how one major international newspaper, the *Times* of London, tried to do just that.

1. This story was related by Louis Heren in an interview with the author in May, 1975.

Times Coverage of Watergate

The *Times* coverage of the Watergate story was complete and thorough. From the break-in to the pardon, the *Times* covered every major development in the continuing crisis. Many of the stories were written by the *Times*' chief correspondent in Washington, Fred Emery, but he was often helped by other correspondents and commentators.

The story of the break-in at the Democratic national headquarters was given full treatment, although it was eventually integrated into the *Times*' coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign and eventually regulated to a place of unimportance. It was treated as more of an amusing sidelight on the road to McGovern's demise rather than a major political scandal. In doing this, of course, the *Times* was acting no differently than other American and British newspapers, with the notable exception of the Washington *Post*.

The first real attention given to Watergate came when the burglars went on trial for the break-in in January, after the election. *Times* correspondents produced almost daily reports of the courtroom scene, and it is obvious from these reports that they did not like what they saw. No real effort was made to get at the story behind the story, and at the end of the trial, the *Times* said:

> Neither the prosecution nor the defense during the trial had any interest in going into the related political questions such as who hired the spies and financed them.[2]

When the Watergate story began to heat up on Capitol Hill later that spring, the *Times* correspondents were there. The confirmation hearings of L. Patrick Gray, acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, offered some of the first breaks in the Watergate case, and the *Times* heralded that break with the headline over one of its stories: NIXON MEN OBSTRUCTED FBI IN WATERGATE INQUIRY.[3]

During the skirmishing which took place before the Senate Watergate hearings, Nixon had consistently refused to allow his staff to testify before Congress in open hearings. The official explanation for this refusal was executive privilege, but *Times* correspondents saw through that excuse and did well in explaining it to their readers:

> A good part of the White House position stems from an unwillingness to have their men put through such jocular and damaging inquisition by a man of Senator Ervin's calibre – in hearings that are bound to be televised live.[4]

When the Senate hearings finally opened, *Times* correspondents did a yeoman's work in covering. Major sections of the paper were devoted to all aspects of the coverage, sometimes taking up as much as two or three pages

2. The *Times*, Feb. 1, 1973, p. 5.
3. The *Times*, March 7, 1973, p. 8.
4. The *Times*, Apr. 3, 1973, p. 6.

a day. A special WATERGATE section was added to go along with the *Times* regular headings, such as DOMESTIC NEWS, WESTERN EUROPE, OVERSEAS NEWS, etc. Besides the major news stories, sidebars were printed each day, and often there was a parliamentary-type, paraphrased transcript of the day's proceedings. After viewing that coverage, one is left to wonder just what else the *Times* could have done during the hearings.

Yet while the *Times* coverage was massive, the newspaper itself was dissatisfied with the amount of information the hearings had produced. When the hearings finally adjourned for the Fourth of July, a correspondent commented that the 'truth lies with men still in the shadows'.[5] The major revelation of the July testimony was that Nixon had taped his White House conversations, and this story was to have long-range consequences for the *Times* editorial support for Nixon (which will be discussed later).

Even though the hearings ended in August, there was certainly not a shortage of news. The tapes controversy was still raging, and one day it was suddenly revealed that Vice President Spiro Agnew was under criminal investigation for bribe-taking while governor of Maryland. Late in August, Nixon held a rowdy press conference, characterized by much shouting and bitterness between the President and the press. In a good example of British understatement, the *Times* said of the conference: 'Some of the questions were of extreme directness'.[6]

When Agnew resigned in early October, the *Times* began speculating that this move might be just the thing that Nixon's opponents have been awaiting – with Agnew out, impeachment was a real possibility.

The Saturday Night Massacre later that month – when Nixon fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and Attorney General Elliott Richardson and his deputy William Ruckelshaus resigned – stunned *Times* correspondents. In Monday's paper (which was the first edition after those events) under the headline WAVES OF DEMANDS BY BOTH PARTIES FOR NIXON TO BE IMPEACHED, the *Times* correspondent wrote that Nixon had 'bankrupted all his moral reserves'. Hinting at Gestapo tactics by the FBI (which had moved to occupy Cox's office) and military intervention, Fred Emery wrote that 'the situation is obviously fraught with danger... It seems the stuff of nightmares, but too much has happened this year for men to disbelieve anything they hear when they are awake'.[7]

Later that week, after Nixon had gone on television and made one of his many vows to stay in office, the *Times* commented that it was 'not a convincing performance unless the country can be brought to believe that all his troubles were caused by the press'.[8]

5. The *Times*, July 2, 1973, p. 5.
6. The *Times*, Aug. 23, 1973, p. 1.
7. The *Times*, Oct. 22, 1973, p. 1.
8. The *Times*, Oct. 27, 1973, p. 1.

Nixon's troubles refused to desist, and so did the *Times* coverage of them. Throughout November, December and January, a sea of crises continued which included tape gaps, a new special prosecutor, calls for resignation and/or impeachment, and misfilling of tax returns. The fact that Nixon had grown weary under the pressures became evident to Fred Emery in the middle of November:

> Seeing him from a few feet away for the first time in some three months, I found that his face, deeply lined, had aged sharply. But his color appeared good, his demeanor perky and his walk had a bounce.[9]

Even the British parliamentary election campaign in February 1974 failed to oust Watergate from the news pages of the *Times*. The House Judiciary Committee had been commissioned to begin an impeachment inquiry, and Nixon's plea that a year of Watergate was enough seemed to have no effect on events. All attempts being made by the new special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, to get at the tapes were being effectively blocked by the White House, and that led the *Times* to comment: 'It is clear that the coverup is continuing'.[10]

In the first week of March, when the President held what was to be his last news conference, the *Times* correspondent wrote that during the conference, Nixon was 'sweating heavily... visibly shaken by some of the questions'.[11] And the next day, another of the *Times* correspondents in Washington commented that 'The most striking, if little noticed, feature of the current situation is the general acceptance by all parties of public discussion of impeachment'.[12]

The next major event in the Watergate crisis was the Nixon transcripts of the tapes, and again the *Times* effort at covering the story was legion. After printing several pages of excerpts, the *Times* commented through its chief Washington correspondent Fred Emery:

> The transcripts simply do not correspond to the President's claims of the night before – let alone with his solemn states of a year ago.[13]

In view of the tapes, the *Times* said, Nixon's claim of full disclosure from the beginning was 'impossible to take seriously'.[14]

The most important aspects of the Watergate story then began to take place on two other fronts: the closed sessions of the House Judiciary Committee and the Supreme Court. The *Times* covered the committee by leaks, as did all other newspapers, and it set the stage for the Supreme Court battle

9. The *Times*, Nov. 16, 1973, p. 9.
10. The *Times*, Feb. 16, 1974, p. 6.
11. The *Times*, March 7, 1974, p. 1.
12. The *Times*, March 8, 1974, p. 7.
13. The *Times*, May 2, 1974, p. 14.
14. The *Times*, May 3, 1974, p. 6.

for its readers. On the day after the historic hearing took place, the *Times* correspondent who covered it wrote that James St. Clair, the president's attorney, asked the court to withhold its decision until after the Judiciary Committee's impeachment hearings, and that the lawyer argued 'consistently, if not always coherently'.[15] The question of whether or not the president would obey a Supreme Court decision that went against him dominated the speculation during the intermission between the hearing and the court's decision, and *Times* journalists became increasingly impatient with the ways James St. Clair found of evading it. St. Clair's press conference of July 23 provoked these comments from the *Times* reporter:

> Most dismaying to the public... was Mr. St. Clair's repeated refusal to answer the simple question whether President Nixon would abide by a Supreme Court ruling ordering him to turn over tape recordings...[16]

When the decision finally came for Nixon to do just that, and Nixon consented to it, the *Times* headlined the story with: PRESIDENT NIXON YIELDS TO THE SUPREME COURT[17] and then printed the full text of the decision.

On the other front, the Judiciary Committee was moving without interruption along the road to impeachment. When the public debate finally opened, the *Times* reporter predicted, 'What looks like the first of America's many weeks of impeachment has begun'.[18] The *Times* gave the hearings full coverage, but oddly enough while other Watergate-related stories were getting front-page treatment (such as the indictment of John Connally for taking milk fund bribes and the sentencing of John Dean and jailing of John Ehrlichman), the Judiciary Committee hearings did not make page one of the *Times* – even after the committee had voted on the first article of impeachment.

Nixon's confession that he had participated in the coverup produced 'some seismic reaction in Congress',[19] according to the *Times*, which carried the full transcript of the incriminating tape and accompanying statement. The events moved Fred Emery to write:

> His contorted claim that whatever he ordered and however he conspired, it all came out right in the end because the 'guilty', as he calls them, were prosecuted simply will not wash. The Nixon Presidency is dying with a whimper.[20]

That week was devoted to the most intense Nixon watching, with the President issuing daily denials and statements about his staying to fight, and the

15. The *Times*, July 9, 1974, p. 1.
16. The *Times*, July 24, 1974, p. 5.
17. The *Times*, July 25, 1974, p. 1.
18. The *Times*, July 23, 1974, p. 8.
19. The *Times*, Aug. 6, 1974, p. 1.
20. The *Times*, Aug. 7, 1974, p. 14.

press reporting more and more of his supporting crumbling away.

Finally, Nixon realized that he could last no longer, and on August 8 the famous photo of his hugging his tearful daughter was issued (and carried in the *Times* the next day) and that evening he went on national television and announced that he would resign. Fred Emery wrote of the speech that he spoke 'calmly and deliberately... (and) made a most cursory apology for the scandals... his one admission of wrong struck an incongruous and paltry note'.[21]

Nixon's emotional leave-taking the next day provoked these comments:

> Much of his going was studied, as he has always controlled every reaction toward outsiders. Only a Nixon could have released the poignantly emotional photo of his family and his daughter, in their moment of anguish... He obviously couldn't bear to leave.[22]

The *Times* followed the spectre of Nixon to San Clemente and made periodic reports on his health and state of mind during the month of August. Like many other newspapers, it seemed on the verge of forgetting about him when President Ford suddenly announced a blanket pardon for the former president. The *Times* also covered that controversy in full and commented that Ford had managed to take a 'bold and difficult step'.[23]

Editorial Policies and the Due Process Controversy

Editorially, the *Times* was split in its attitudes toward Richard Nixon and Watergate. At first the paper looked upon Nixon as a great international leader and was sympathetic with his domestic plight. In all of the accusations, it tended to give him the benefit of the doubt. *Times* editors tended to look upon those accusations as coming from a hostile press and consequently lacking in substance.

By June 1973, however, the substance of many of these accusations had been given credence. The Washington *Post* had received full credit for its initial exposures, the Senate investigations committee was showing daily televised hearings, and the Federal grand jury was interviewing the principal witnesses. The investigative role, once shouldered by the press (namely the *Post*) alone, had been taken over by the three branches of government. Even though these 'official' investigations were underway, the press did not give up its own role in the process. On the contrary, the press was doing more investigation now than at any other time in the Watergate story. New allegations were being made almost daily against the President and his men in different newspapers and newsmagazines.

The *Times* grew increasingly disturbed about this, fearing a 'trial by the

21. The *Times*, Aug. 9, 1974, p. 1.
22. The *Times*, Aug. 10, 1974, p. 1.
23. The *Times*, Sept. 9, 1974, p. 1.

press' situation. In a long editorial headed, DUE PROCESS OF LAW, written by editor William Rees-Mogg, the *Times* said the *Post* should be given credit for what it had done, but:

> ...now we have a simultaneous process of trial by newspaper allegation, beside the Senate hearings and the Grand Jury. The American press, and particularly the Washington *Post*, deserve their full credit for forcing the Watergate affair into the open. They are however now publishing vast quantities of prejudicial matter that would be contempt under British law, which again must tend to prejudice the fair trial of any accused, or, if it came to that, of the President.

The *Times* went on to criticize the *Post* and the New York *Times* for printing the grand jury testimony of John Dean:

> Of course the American law of contempt is very different from ours, but the principles of fair trial are the same. How can one justify the decision to publish the Dean leak? Here is a real piece of hanging evidence, the missing element – if it is believed – in a chain of proof. Here is a piece of wholly suspect evidence, unsworn, unverified, not cross-examined, contradicting previous evidence, subject to none of the safeguards of due process, given by a man who may be bargaining for his freedom. How can the newspapers defend themselves from the very charge they are bringing against the President, the charge of making a fair trial impossible, if they are now publishing evidence so damning and so doubtful with all the weight of authority that their publication gives?[24]

The editorial caused a storm of protests among journalists in the U.S. It was largely seen as an untimely defense of President Nixon, and Tom Wicker, columnist for the New York *Times*, wrote that no newspaper could back off from a breaking story of 'substantial importance' and rely instead on official sources. 'That is what too much of the American press did from June, 1972, until early this year'.[25]

The Washington *Post* printed most of the editorial, with an answer of its own:

> For how long would a British Government remain in office if it had lied systematically to the press, and by extension to Congress and the public, for ten months, ... Would the *Times* of London in such circumstances be talking about due process for the Prime Minister? This is the heart of what is wrong with the *Times* argument. We are not in Britain; we have a different set of checks and balances...[26]

Rees-Mogg was invited to address the National Press Club in Washington the next week, and he made no attempt to back off from his original position. In fact, he took it a step further. He told the assembled journalists that the press in America had always been unfair to Nixon; that publication of the Pentagon Papers had indicated their disregard for state secrecy; and

24. The *Times*, June 5, 1973, p. 17.

25. The *Times*, June 11, 1973, p. 6. The *Times*, covered its own controversy almost as well as it did the Watergate story.

26. The *Times*, June 14, 1973, p. 6.

that they were behaving like a 'hunting pack', especially with their 'uncritical' handling of Dean's testimony.[27]

Two days after Rees-Mogg's speech, however, the most cogent defense of what was happening in America came not from an American newspaper but from the London *Sunday Times*. In a long editorial entitled WHAT DUE PROCESS?, the *Sunday Times* pointed out that things are done differently in America than they are in Great Britain. The argument that Senator Ervin should suspend public hearings and the press should cease its investigations rests on two false assumptions. One is that what Ervin and the press are doing is in contempt of judicial proceedings.

> The President's role in Watergate, and his future in the job are not matters for legal and judicial assessment... Mr. Nixon does not face trial. What is happening to him is political not judicial in character.
>
> The second false assumption is that the political crucible in which the President's future will be resolved should somehow exclude the Press and Congress, or at least restrict their function more narrowly than it is restricted by the Constitution...
>
> We believe that the rescue of President Nixon, if it can be accomplished, must come from greater not less disclosure. If British practice has anything to teach it is not in the law of contempt, but in the tradition which insists that the Prime Minister cannot remain silent in the face of damaging allegations.
>
> ...it is right that the search for truth goes on in a way fitting to the American system.[28]

The *Times* support of the President never snapped; it slowly crumbled. The major blow to its foundation came just a month later when the existence of the tapes was revealed, and the President refused to give them up. Though it tried mightily to understand the President's reasoning – examining every side of the question in a long, wordy editorial – the *Times* simply could not side with the President on this issue.

> If one accepts President Nixon's letter (to Cox saying he won't give up the tapes), he has embarked on this great constitutional crisis in order to prevent the disclosure of evidence which would not be decisive one way or the other. Even if he is telling the truth, he has decided on an astonishingly dangerous gamble, with the Presidency of the United States as the stake.[29]

The *Times* could rarely support the President after that, although it still gave plaudits to his foreign policy ventures. A year later, when the House Judiciary Committee had voted its impeachment articles and the end was drawing near, the *Times* finally came out for resignation. It obviously was not an easy decision for the editors, nor was it an easy editorial for the readers. The pros and cons of resignation were discussed in full, but the *Times* finally came to this tortuous conclusion:

> On the whole, and especially from the point of view of America's foreign allies, the balance

27. The *Times*, June 16, 1973, p. 5.
28. *Sunday Times*, June 17, 1973, p. 16.
29. The *Times*, July 25, 1973, p. 17.

comes out in favour of resignation, though subject to certain reservations. In the first place, it should be delayed until the full House of Representatives has voted, probably by August 23... Secondly, Mr. Nixon should find the courage to make a sufficient admission of responsibility to abort the birth of a stab-in-the-back legend. He would have nothing to lose and might regain a little moral stature by doing so. It is the sort of gesture which would help to compensate for cutting short the slow but deeply impressive procedure on which Congress has now embarked with so much agony.[30]

Conclusions

The *Times* of London took on the complex and confusing, as well as tiring, Watergate story with an understanding and stamina probably shown by few newspapers outside of the United States. Almost every detail of the scandal was covered and analyzed. Full texts of speeches, statements, judicial opinions, and transcripts were printed, allowing the *Times* to live up to its paper-of-record image.

The working reporters for the *Times* were anti-Nixon from the beginning. Their biases shown through the news columns fairly brightly, yet it could be argued that Watergate was essentially an anti-Nixon story and just to report it would be showing a bias against the President. *Times* reporters went a step further, giving us a good example of a basic difference between British and American journalism. American journalists are haunted by the spectre of 'objectivity', a spectre which bothers few British journalists.

Consequently, for example, when Nixon was evoking executive privilege to keep John Dean from testifying in March 1973, a *Times* reporter had no inhibitions about inserting in a news story the following paragraph:

The White House had denied there was any impropriety in Mr. Dean's participation (in the FBI investigation). If this was the case, it is hard to see why Mr. Dean's appearance might, in the President's words, 'harm the public interest'... The irony of the President's position is that he is pleading the need to remain silent as Senator Ervin's special committee conducts its study, while denying the committee information it needs to make a significant investigation.[31]

This is not to imply a criticism of British journalism. It is merely to point out a difference.

The major strength of the *Times* coverage of Watergate was a thorough understanding of the intricacies of the American political system on the part of its editors and reporters. Rarely were they caught short on this point, and the Watergate story was one which drew heavily on their combined knowledge.

30. The *Times*, July 31, 1974, p. 17.
31. The *Times*, March 19, 1973, p. 6.